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## "We Love Life!": A Novel Approach to Explosive Remnants of War

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## "We Love Life": A Novel Approach to Explosive Remnants of War

In 2009 a team of nongovernmental organizations, academics and artists secured grant funding from the U.S. Department of State to use theater as a delivery method for mine-risk education. As a result, more than 7,000 Jordanian children have seen the highly successful stage play "We Love Life."

by Kamel GH K. Sa'adi [ Life Line for Consultancy and Rehabilitation ]

"We love life!" may not be something that landmine survivors readily say when they are in the throes of a painful recovery or coping with the difficulties of surviving without limbs. Some lose their way in despair; others decide to live life to its fullest; some need to see how others in similar situations respond before they can choose their path in life. Preventing landmine and other explosive remnants of war accidents by creating awareness is a goal of many mine-action programs.

With this purpose in mind, James Madison University's Mine Action Information Center sought and secured a grant from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (PM/WRA) in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs to develop, produce and deliver a play in Jordan about landmines and other explosive remnants of war, designed to teach children, primarily adolescents aged 11 to 15 years of age, how to identify and avoid these threats. The goal of the program was to eliminate the need for hospital stays and medical treatments by preventing landmine and other ERW accidents. I am happy to say that my Jordanian nongovernmental organization, Life Line for Consultancy and Rehabilitation, was chosen to partner with MAIC on this mine-risk education program in Jordan. Jordan's National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation was also a valued partner in the project.



Actors during a performance of "We Love Life" in Amman, Jordan, 2009.  
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The project was developed and carried out from September 2008 through May 2009, during which time the MAIC/NCDR/LLCR team identified the problem of ERW in Jordan's northwest region, created the play and delivered it to thousands of schoolchildren and families. The play also addressed landmine and ERW accidents, victim assistance, and social sensitivity toward victims.

### Development Approach

According to NCDR's national victim database, children, in addition to scrap-metal collectors, are the group most affected by ERW. Because NCDR already had provisions in its



Actors prepare for a performance of "We Love Life."

MRE framework that indicated every school in mine-affected areas should receive MRE, the team believed a school-based program would best fit the needs of the community. In addition, the team decided the MRE should include elements of expressive arts and a theatrical play to capture the attention of the target audience.

The MAIC/NCDR/LLCR team knew that plays are effective in reaching a target audience when they draw upon real-life drama. Consequently, it decided to base the play on actual Jordanian events.

### Project Goals

The MAIC outlined the following goals and objectives for the school program:

- Provide a theatrical performance to approximately 7,000 students and key citizens in the 11 affected provinces of northwest Jordan
- Deliver awareness messages regarding the existence of mines and unexploded ordnance
- Focus on the right procedures children or adults must follow when they encounter a landmine or piece of UXO
- Express the agony and suffering of mine victims, their families, and those close to them
- Show how affected lands can be most productive to society when cleared and made safe from the dangers of ERW

- Educate children and adults about how best to behave and act around children with disabilities, including mine victims.
- Demonstrate the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities while showing that they can contribute to society and that they should be encouraged and accepted<sup>1</sup>

### Early Production

LLCR contacted well-known Jordanian playwright Ghannam Ghannam to produce the theatrical portion of the program. The playwright was further aided by a James Madison University team, composed of two psychologists, Dr. Lennis Echterling and Dr. Anne Stewart; a statistician, Dr. Hasan Hamdan; and the MAIC Project Manager, Dr. Suzanne Fiederlein. Echterling and Stewart helped direct the tone of the play, ensuring the performance would not scare the children, but rather create a message they could learn from and internalize. The JMU team visited Jordan 7–14 July 2008, to assist in the play's development and script. The play's narrative, later named "We Love Life," included the NCDR's most recently published information and studies, as well as MRE messages that met international and Jordanian standards.



By 10 November 2008, the play was ready for its first rehearsal at the Mohtaraf Remal for Arts. Actors in the play included landmine and UXO victims. NCDR staff and the JMU project team reviewed and commented on the play to ensure that it was both culturally and age-appropriate, as well as effective in delivering MRE messages to the local population.

Before presenting “We Love Life” to the schoolchildren in February and March 2009, the NCDR reassessed the performance locations. “The initial proposal for the project had one performance of the play being held in each of the country’s 11 affected provinces in the northwestern region,” states Fiederslein. “NCDR, however, requested that there be a great concentration on the governorate of Al Mafraq, where it had done some MRE activities but thought additional activities were needed.”<sup>1</sup>



Local boys pose near the Sama Al Sarhan statue

In addition to preparing for the performances themselves, the team needed to comprehend local tradition and remain culturally sensitive. To address these issues, the team ensured that important members of the community were invited to performances and offered gifts to demonstrate respect. Separate performances were offered for boys and girls to adhere to cultural guidelines; however, the script remained the same for both performances.

#### Performances and Art Activities

The play was ultimately performed in six locations, with nine performances to approximately 6,000 audience members. The audience

was visibly pleased with the performances and appreciated the novel approach to MRE. “We Love Life” also included an interactive portion during which the audience could participate in the play’s songs and dances and have the opportunity to ask questions of the cast. At the end of the performance, the children were given notebooks and colored pencils from NCDR to later remind them of the MRE message.

Another factor that made the “We Love Life” play unique was the incorporation of local artwork into the project. In Al Baej in Al Mafraq governorate, local boys who had seen the play painted murals in a well-traveled public site to remind them and others of the lessons they learned from the program. Also, in the community of Sama Al Sarhan, Jordanian artist Abdel Aziz Abu Ghazaleh worked with local schoolchildren to create a sculpture. The theme of the sculpture is “Be Safe.”<sup>2</sup>

The final component of the program included a pre- and post-performance assessment to ensure the students learned from this form of MRE. The sponsors were pleased to find the assessments revealed a change in attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, the assessment was imperative to measure the success of the program and incorporate feedback for future programs.

#### Future Plans

The team is currently discussing future goals of the “We Love Life” play, which PM/WRA has funded for another year. One of the primary issues identified was a need to incorporate other Arabic-speaking countries into this type of MRE. Jordan’s neighboring countries would also benefit from “We Love Life,” with a few simple tweaks to the script to support their unique situations, and the team is exploring the possibility of performing the play in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

A DVD of the original play was produced; the team thinks such a DVD will be an effective method for continuing MRE in Jordan. It is evaluating how to implement the successful use of this DVD in the classroom and is developing a set of guidelines and other materials that



His Royal Highness Prince Mired (third from left), seated next to His Royal Highness Prince Ra'ad and Her Royal Highness Princess Rajwa Bint Ali at a performance of “We Love Life” in Amman, Jordan.

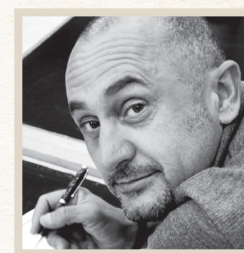
would be provided with the DVD. These materials would ensure that teachers properly introduce the themes addressed in the “We Love Life” play, be able to effectively answer questions regarding landmine accidents and respond with sensitivity to the needs of victims. Ultimately, the team thinks a DVD would be the most efficient distribution of “We Love Life” because it would reach a greater number of students.

The team is also working on distributing the art the children produce in conjunction with “We Love Life.” Although no final decisions have been made, MAIC is looking into a calendar format that would highlight the artwork.

While there is still much work to be done in the Middle East MRE arena, the implementation of the “We Love Life” program is a step in the right direction. Students proved their knowledge of the major messages of the play by demonstrating their new levels of awareness with creative art projects. The MAIC, NCDR and LLCR will continue educating children, teenagers, and adults on the perils of landmines and ERW. The team is looking forward to expanding the play to Jordan’s neighbors. ♦

See Endnotes, Page 82

Editorial Assistant Kate McFarland of JMU’s Center for International Stabilization and Recovery also contributed to this article.



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